Sermon for 3/13 /22, Gen. 15:1-12, 17-18, Luke 13:31-35

Balance in a Time of War

It is Lent, and it is wartime. Must we, after a long week of unrelenting war news, spend time now, in further reflection? I’m sure many of you hope not, and I have wrestled with what to do. Perhaps you came here full of the gladness of this bright although cold spring morning and would like to hold on to it, to lift our hearts and minds and search for hope. Perhaps we can do both. But first, let’s just be quiet together for a moment, opening our hearts to those who suffer, especially in Ukraine, but also in Russia and to God who loves us…

On the third Sunday in Lent, in 2003 - so 19 years ago, at St. John’s Church in Bethesda, I preached about the Iraq war that had just begun. I’ve reread those words this past week and have amended a couple of paragraphs to fit today - not hard to do; I needed only to change the name Iraq to Ukraine in a couple of places, and yes, sadly, the words ring true. Here’s my updated version:

“And so it has come, the long-expected, long-feared, long resisted and unjustified – WAR. It fills the night skies over Ukraine, fills the streets of their cities with rubble - and worse, maimed and dead humanity. War fills our screens, our ears, a collage of images and sounds - a droning - of planes, of bombers, a droning of voices, trying to inform, explain, make sense.

This war has filled people here and around the world with anxiety, stress, even dread – or rage, or resignation.

And for the most unlucky of families has come the worst - a death, not only of a soldier, but of an innocent, a civilian, a child - the visit from Hell - a wrenching, searing, sickening hole in the soul, dagger-in-the gut loss.”

That’s what I said back then, with just the name changes. And it is to my mind, startling, because back then we were the perpetrators of the war. We attacked a sovereign nation, based on lies we used to justify what we did. We prompted rage and criticism from around the world, as we toppled a regime and inserted ourselves in Iraq for years to come. We need to remember this when we are tempted to wrap ourselves in self-righteous anger at what Putin is doing now. We are not immune, and we don’t have clean hands when it comes to unnecessary war.

Having said that, I hasten to add, the analogy goes only so far. To my mind, Zelensky and his people are undeserving mostly innocent victims of Putin’s aggression, pawns in his drive for power and security against the West. And Saddam Hussein was indeed a cruel and violent authoritarian ruler, deserving of being called to account. But our war against him and his people was chosen by us to pursue our own aims, and arguably it was not our right to topple his regime. Sobering thoughts in this season of self-reflection and penitence.

Perhaps we are being called now to find a difficult and precarious moral balance, and I believe finding that balance is good work for Lent. We live, as people and as a nation, between what is best in us, and what is worst. I’m pondering how we can stand up for what we know to be good and right - in ourselves, and in our country, and at the same time live with humility as the flawed people and nation that we are. How do we combine repentance with hope and idealism and action. Can we indeed find a moral balance here between hand-wringing helplessness and longed-for perfection?

The policy questions - what to do as the situation in Ukraine worsens and drags on, are for our leaders, our president, our diplomats. But as we watch in horror at what Putin is doing, the hope question remains. Do we dwell merely in the bleak darkness of the wreckage of Ukraine, or the sackcloth and ashes of our own role in such wars? Or is there another more fitting garb for our faltering faith, a crown of love and hope, however tarnished, that does not fade away?

The columnist David Brooks wrote a powerful article in the NYT on March 3 about restored faith - not of the religious sort, but of faith in our liberal democracy. He talks of how the Ukrainians have reminded us of what it means to not only believe in democracy, but to act bravely to defend it. Brooks even calls this the Gospel of Democracy and claims, and I quote “Despite all our failings, the gospel is still glowingly true.” I know, he’s getting a bit too close to making an idol of democracy, but in the good news sense, the word gospel, small g, does apply to democracy. Democracy is, or should be, good news! And I hope, along with Mr. Brooks, that if there be any silver lining to this ghastly war, it will prove a wake-up call to the urgency of standing up for, defending, and sacrificing for the values we hold here at home. I hope we’ll find some bridges to unity around these values that are deeper than the bitter partisanship that has so defined our public life in recent years. It’s a glimmer of hope.

And so I wonder what today’s readings may have to offer about where we find hope and how we act to maintain moral balance in these murky times. In Genesis we have a highly doubtful Abram about the future of his clan. In a vision God promises him that his so-far barren wife Sara will have a son and that their descendants will possess the land to which God has led them and will be as countless as the stars. Abram’s dream includes some weird stuff about animals being cut in two and laid out and then being burned by a fire pot and a torch - the signs of God’s covenant with Abram to keep the promises he has just made. And Abram chooses to believe - to believe in the very existence of God and God’s power to act despite his doubts! Talk about the triumph of hope over experience! Coming from doubt and facing the unknown, he chooses to embrace the promise. And, as we know, the promise was indeed fulfilled; faith, based on slim hope, was rewarded. This seemingly blind faith worked for Abram. But what basis have we, in times such as these, to believe that God will somehow move the hearts of those waging the war to end it sooner rather than later, by a cease-fire and negotiations? Faith can’t mean just believing that it will all work out, can it?

And then in the Gospel - what a scene we have! The Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is out to kill him - Jesus shoots back with “tell that fox for me” about his works and healings and that he intends to continue his course. He expresses his sadness at the state of Jerusalem and his intention to go there anyway, to risk being killed like the prophets before him. Reading this, I couldn’t help but be reminded of President Zelensky in Ukraine. Warned of the dangers he faces at Putin’s hands, offered an escape, he shoots back, “I need ammunition, not a ride!” Knowing the danger to himself, he has stayed with his people, modeling what it looks like to sacrifice oneself for something greater and to truly care for one’s people and not one’s political skin. Overtones of the Biblical are certainly here in the drama of this confrontation.

Faith in an unknown future. Abram. Calling out a cruel authoritarian and being willing to die for it. Jesus. We find the hopes and fears, the bravery and sacrifice of this time in our ancient scriptures. We find God’s mysterious love at work down through the centuries. Holding up a thin round wafer and a chalice of wine – the symbols of a God who lives in our flesh - a God who in Jesus knew a broken body and blood spilled in a violent death – these symbols hold renewed meaning and power in this time of war. We offer them up with aching hearts, knowing how much our wars must grieve God’s Holy Spirit.

It’s hard to know how this ends, and little each of us can do on our own to make any difference. But there is a faithful response, and I found a good example of it in Robert Hubbell’s daily newsletter this past Wednesday.” He writes daily from a positive perspective as an antidote to so much in the media that trumpets worst case scenarios and fuels our fear and anger. This is what he had to say:

“I want to return to my call for calm and perspective in a dangerous situation. What is happening in Ukraine is inhumane and immoral. But the answer cannot be to start a nuclear war… Some readers continue to argue that we should engage in direct military confrontation in Ukraine to stop Putin. That cannot happen…Anger and outrage are not substitutes for sober assessments by the US intelligence community. Though we should do all we can for Ukraine short of direct military intervention, we must stay our current course—for the sake of humanity and the world.”

To my mind, this is a faithful response to what is. But then along with that, a faith that God does exist and that God’s love does undergird the creation, and, based on that, a willingness to hope for a brighter day. But it’s hard to have hope when we don’t know what to do. It’s so hard to watch the slaughter of innocents and feel helpless in the face of evil unleashed. It’s like the ending of Matthew Arnold’s poem, “Dover Beach:”

“And we are here as on a darkling plain

swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight

where ignorant armies clash by night.’’ (repeat)

This is how it feels. There is no good outcome here; too much damage has already been done. But can we at least hold fast to whatever hope is in us, like old Abram who trusted God and believed the promise. Can we at least support those who stand up and sacrifice for the good of others as Jesus did? Can we not complain about higher gas prices?! Please!!! Can we contribute where help is needed; can we welcome refugees? Can we advocate for negotiations and pray that some end will soon come? Can we honor the best that is in us and trust God’s power to bring new life, even out of death and horror. This is the path of Lent, from sin and despair and darkness to the glory of Easter. May we follow it together with loving, hurting hearts.

And, finally, for our hurting hearts, I offer a posting on Instagram from my son Chris - it came yesterday as I was trying to wind this up. He sends a picture of a single perfect magnolia bud against a clear blue sky with a robin perched nearby. And the text says this: “It’s hard to watch the terrible invasion of Ukraine and not be depressed. We should feel sorrow for the people…But I can’t be sad all the time. The robins are out; the magnolias are blooming, and the daffodils are popping. Baseball is back and spring is here.” Amen.